

The Underground Phenomenon of Homoerotic Fan Culture in China

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Abstract

Film fandom culture persists alongside audience viewing practices, whether in cinemas or at home. Although the tradition of fans creating art and texts based on source material has a long history, such creations do not merely uncover implicit meanings or double entendres within the work; they also provide imaginative space for the fans themselves. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced within homoerotic fan cultures. While fan culture is a global phenomenon, it holds specific significance in China: state control and censorship have driven it underground. This dissertation analyzes the phenomenon through the dimensions of textual production, textual consumption, and celebrity effect. By examining film fandom culture, it aims to demonstrate how the production and consumption of texts within homoerotic fandoms contribute to enhancing societal understanding of homoerotic culture and IP films, thereby promoting the commercialization of IP films and the development of the homoerotic fan economy.

Keywords

homoerotic fan culture in China, films, text production, text consumption, celebrities and stars, IP consumption

1. Introduction

As audiences watch films in cinemas or at home, there will always be a fandom culture about films. And while there is a long-standing tradition in fan culture of art and further production of films and texts created by fans affected by the original, it is also possible to explore what is hidden and contains innuendo, or simply to provide fans with an opportunity to use their own imagination. This is best illustrated by the phenomenon of homoerotic fan culture. This global phenomenon has a particular resonance in China, where state control and censorship have forced it underground. Using *Time Raiders* (Lee, 1960) as a study, the phenomenon is analyzed in terms of three different aspects of text production, text consumption, and the effect of celebrities and stars.

2. The Phenomenon of Text Production in Homoerotic Fan Culture

From television to the Internet period, fan culture has been a dominant cultural phenomenon in today's society, and the fan consumption economy is one of the markets valued by capital. With the advancement of digital media, fan groups have become subdivided into various kinds. The increasing number of fan groups formed by mass Internet users has progressively evolved its own structure (Larsen, 2011). As long as the audience is involved in the screening of the film, they can play the role of fans and to a large extent will use the original as the basis for re-creation, generating the subsequent development effect of the film mainly by

text production and text consumption. Fans as a cross-media business model are divided into two parts: text consumption and text production. Text production by fans includes fan conversations and the creation of homoerotic texts (homoerotic videos, music, and novels), while for fans text consumption is characterized by the purchase and collection of peripheral products and even participation in text consumption activities to gain a sense of collective belonging. Fans focus their attention on the internet, actively pursuing their pleasure by producing and uploading their videos, articles, pictures, etc. Fans aspire more to be associated with specific practices that symbolize glamour, contact with celebrities, and participation in collective fan socializing (Duffett, 2013). Homoerotic fan culture, defined as a community of fans whose main pleasure is homoerotic creation, is an essential component of cultural industrial production and a source of a new IP economy.

Homoerotic text creation is a fictional text in which fans, after watching the original work, want to see more or want to change the content in the original work, thus describing the characters' personalities and behaviors and making character relationship pairings, with a particular focus on the depiction of intimate relationships, based on the character relationships in the original work, which is essentially a reconstruction of the classics and authorities. Homoerotic creation embodies fans' ideas and imaginations of gender as a homoerotic community. They can communicate and express each other directly in the language of sexuality, creating a safe and encouraging space for participating fans to freely express their ideas and imaginations about gender and sexuality. Using the IP film - *Time Raiders* (2016) as a case study, this thesis takes the development phenomenon of homoerotic fan culture into account and delves into homo sapiens text production and fan communities in the context of online communication in mainland China. As a popular form of entertainment for niche youth groups, homoerotic culture has opened up a space for new types of cultural expression on different media platforms and in the new media environment, displaying a unique cultural appeal. China has expanded on the research on the phenomenon of homoerotic culture in Western societies to explain and explore the emergence of homoerotic culture in domestic societies, drawing on and citing theoretical resources as well as types of practices corresponding to Western cultural studies, and studying the phenomenon of homoerotic fan culture based on the development of the Internet and media.

Time Raiders as one of the few Chinese "IP films", with textual solid productivity, many peripheral derivatives, and abundant homoerotic fan activities, are more typical of creative works in homoerotic culture. *Time Raiders* is adapted from the classic Chinese novel *The Graver Robber's Chronicles* (2007), which has spawned a number of films, TV dramas, and cultural products that have reached a much wider audience than other contemporaries and have become an impressive "IP work" due to the spread of the internet and media platforms in recent years. *Time Raiders*, the first film adaptation of the classic novel, contributes to the multi-channel distribution medium of online fiction, continuing the productivity of homoerotic culture from cultural creation to peripheral derivatives, and moving it from a closed online "corner" to mass online social media. The film also features influential actors, providing the fan community with more imaginative ways to produce texts. *Time Raiders* is a new medium for the homoerotic culture of *The Graver Robber's Chronicles* novel, a space for cultural production, cultural practices, and commercial modus operandi. Homoerotic culture has shown a more active aggregation and flow with the emergence of cinema, engaging fan communities in highly interactive activities such as consumption, creation, and entertainment.

However, in China, homoerotic fans are both a group of people with a special significance, distinct from participants in mainstream culture and homoerotic culture is also a youth subculture that exists on the internet, representing a post-modern trend challenging traditional values and modern society. Its rise and development are constantly impacting the mainstream culture of Chinese society, while the problems of copyright and pornography have also hindered the public's identification with and participation in this culture. In terms of the state system and censorship, homoerotic culture has a disparate status compared to mainstream culture; therefore, even though the fan base based on *Time Raiders* is much larger than other cultural participants, it still produces and consumes texts in an 'underground' manner, which is completely different from the treatment of homoerotic fan culture in Western society.

With the development of internet technology, homoerotic creators have changed the traditional reading of a text, using digital technology to fuse text, images, and pictures into a richer form of existence. Before the novel *The Graver Robber's Chronicles* was adapted into a film, static concepts and information were simply conveyed to fans through text, who then created homoerotic works based on their imagination. But after the advent of the film, the static textual information was transformed into a moving visual reference, giving fans a more concrete way to access the information, hence the more widely distributed homoerotic videos, where

the dynamic information is frequently more engaging. Social media has changed the face of fan culture and the way fans interact with online media (Brojakowski et al., 2015). This article delves into various social media platforms and analyses the creation of various homoerotic texts about the film *Time Raiders*, in the form of novels, comics, and videos that have spread more widely, thanks to the rapidly developing media platforms in China in recent years, such as TikTok, a popular video social networking software among people of all ages, where the homoerotic videos created about *Time Raiders* are still being played and liked by hundreds of thousands of people, reaching up to 1.2 million; and thanks to the strength of the film's distribution, the original comic version has sold more than 20 million copies in the three years of its publication, especially on comic websites, where the total number of hits on the comic version exceeds 70 million; Moreover, due to the strength of the film's distribution, the original comic version has sold more than 20 million copies in the three years since its publication, especially on comic websites, where the total number of hits on the comic version exceeds 70 million; works in the form of homoerotic novels are spread across various media platforms, accumulating uncountable years; in addition, fan communication platforms are diversified, encompassing In addition, the fan communication platforms are diverse, including Sina Weibo, Baidu posting and other media platforms, with nearly 100,000 hot trends and fan interactions.

A more widespread production of homoerotic texts than *Time Raiders* is the comic book adaptation of the Marvel IP films. In *The Avengers* (Whedon, 1964), for example, the characters and relationships in the film were interpreted by fans and posted on YouTube, with 8.51 million views of the video, and the fan community used their imagination to 'recreate' the film by editing scenes and filming footage. This has not only raised the profile of the IP film but is also a reflection of Western society's high tolerance of homoerotic fan culture. IP films capitalize on consumers' emotions toward the original work, reinventing existing works in the form of films. Consumers' enjoyment and acceptance of the extension will be influenced by the popularity of the IP parent brand (Jiang et al., 2022). To fully exploit the copyright resources of IP content products, China has begun to learn from the Western cultural industry's "copyright management" strategy. As a pioneer in the development of IP films, "Marvel" films have captured the majority of the audience and market, and their influence and attention far exceed those of similar films, and their business model is highly representative.

However, the IP movie industry chain requires the concerted efforts of national policies, enterprises, and consumers. In terms of text production, the Spider-Man comic book series reached sales of 2.5 million copies in 1990, with total comic book version revenues of approximately 1.074 billion, ranking it third among the world's best-selling comic book IP, and as of 2020 derivatives sales of \$15.88 billion. In comparison to Marvel's IP cultural products, it is undoubtedly much more difficult for modern Chinese society to develop IP movie companion products on a large scale. Since the release of the film *Time Raiders*, an increasing number of companies and platforms have been focusing on the adaptation of IP works, and at the same time discovering the business opportunities and benefits brought by homoerotic creations, with text production and marketing as the main focus to increase efforts to promote IP content, and thus the impact on the homoerotic fan community. Fans have contributed to the construction of homoerotic texts through capital and corporate propaganda, engaging in a secret and 'underground' method of communication across multiple media platforms. Under censorship, some homoerotic works are not known to the general public, so fans can only communicate and share their creations through hidden channels, such as AO3, a popular website in recent years, which is independent of the general public and is a website for homoerotic works, accessible and viewable only by invitation from fans. However, in 2021, due to the uncontrollable nature of the homoerotic fan community, this website was exposed to the public view, leading to a renewed strengthening of state policy to control homoerotic culture, restricting the depiction of intimate sexual acts in homoerotic creations, as well as the fact that films and dramas based on IP cannot contain homoerotic intimacy either.

The resistance of mainstream Chinese culture to phenomena such as sexuality and homosexuality can be seen in the creation of homoerotic texts, in which homoerotic groups create new languages and texts to interact and fight under the rule of those in authority, sparking a trend in contemporary cultural production. The popular image of the fan community remains negative, both in online media and in works of fiction (Larsen, 2011). Under state policy, a variety of 'underground' websites and platforms were created to welcome the creative exchange between communities of homo sapiens fans, hidden from the public eye, becoming a unique and specific fan culture that is not only restricted by mainstream culture but is still bound by various policies and treaties to this day. In contrast to Western society's acceptance of homoerotic culture, contemporary China has a hegemonic organization of sexuality and gender, and the possibility of same-sex love is forbidden by the

modern sexual system (Martin, 2010). Compared to Western societies, neither IP content development nor the derivation of homoerotic creations have been able to form a large-scale form of distribution in the country, reflecting the cultural differences and policy dominance in the country, while the gradual exploitation of homoerotic creations by capital and the market, as well as the constant development of new products around a large fan community, have taken homoerotic culture out of its traditional sharing mode and turned it into a commercialized nature with a focus on profit. This aspect has led to increased state policy control over homoerotic fan culture. As the main participant in homoerotic culture, the fan community has an extremely flexible and interactive nature and is one of the groups that are more affected by the policy.

3. The Fan Economy of the IP Film Industry

In recent years, the rapid development of IP films has a broad commercial value, and the development of IP films relies on the realization of a fan economy to convert content into consumption. The fan economy is a business model for generating income based on the relationship between fans and followers and is a form of marketing to obtain economic and social benefits by increasing the stability of the user group. The fan economy uses emotion and consumerism to classify the target group for sales, without the need for extensive research and study and relies on the emotional attachment of fans to generate revenue, making it the main source of revenue for IP films. Fan consumption is frequently at the heart of social practices, especially as the behavior surrounding fan activity is itself a consumer sector (Dionísio et al., 2008). The fan economy is an emotional economy and has formed a complete consumer chain, being both producer and consumer, with capital realizing economic and social benefits through market-oriented operations. Fans as a cross-media business model are divided into two parts: text consumption and text production. In addition to participating in text creation, the activities of the same person can better reflect the fan culture in consumption.

The homoerotic fan economy of IP films is text consumption in the form of peripheral product purchases and collections, and participation in offline exhibition events, with which the anime industry has a strong relationship with the fan economy. Homoerotic fan consumption means supporting text creation and includes posters, peripherals, handicrafts, and cosplay comic exhibitions. Most fan groups organize various forms of public or private events, such as film screenings, cosplay (Lamerichs, 2011). Due to copyright issues and policy restrictions, the works purchased by fans are often original anime images, such as anime stickers, dolls, and homoerotic drawing books, which are sold by the original creators on shopping platforms such as Taobao.com, while homoerotic novels are more often viewed for free on websites and then accumulate attention, when a regular fan base of homoerotic novels is formed then the periphery is developed for sale. In homoerotic culture, a large number of original painters and authors are the main targets of fan consumption, and homoerotic authors will decide how to sell their works based on fan data feedback. This simple way of consumption is the main involvement of the homoerotic fans, which consume fewer resources in terms of time, money, and effort to achieve satisfactory results.

Different types of fan buyers have their preferences, and for the more stable consumer groups of IP film's homoerotic works, simply buying the periphery cannot satisfy their desired content, so they will choose to participate in exhibition activities to gain a collective sense of belonging. With the support of platforms and capital markets, cosplay comic exhibitions and other events are held to provide an offline platform for homoerotic fans to showcase and communicate with each other. Modern exhibitions combined with IP derivatives are often licensed to businesses by copyright holders, and organizing IP exhibitions that incorporate anime and cultural and creative themes can attract a larger fan base. While anime images as the most prominent content of IP exhibitions are currently the most attractive form of the IP industry, making characters from films into anime images for sale and exhibition realizes the recycling of IP business models. IP-themed exhibitions enhance the connection with fans while capturing consumer demand and exploring opportunities for the development of the IP industry themed exhibitions are also a new form of exhibition practice. Even for minor consumption events, the capital market still makes enough profit to keep directing fans to new forms of consumption, such as Internet radio, in order to make a profit. Homoerotic authors become anchors of media platforms to record and edit their recorded works, and homoerotic fans follow and listen to their works according to their personal preferences, with a wide range of mobility and choice.

In the beginning, internet radio was more liberal in terms of anchors, but with the involvement of the capital market, anchors also found business opportunities to contract with platforms and companies to co-create IP

derivatives. Unlike the instantaneous nature of online activities, offline activities are smaller in scale and less time-sensitive in terms of access to information, and there is more freedom for offline activities than for text creation, which is strictly controlled by censorship. The IP derivatives of the Marvel series occupy a large market share, thanks to the well-established IP derivatives industry chain in the US and the IP derivatives consumption business model regarding design and marketing as a whole. Disney's commercial and marketing strategy is distinct from the domestic market, divided into temporal and spatial dimensions, traditional and modern, and online and offline approaches. In 2009, Disney opened its first e-commerce platform in China and sold more than 5,000 legally licensed products on Taobao (Shen et al., 2022). Take Disney as an example, the parent company of Marvel Cinemas, relying on the mature IP industry chain, Disney has achieved IP real estate many times, Disney through film and animation character images to create IP derivatives.

From *The Avengers* (2012) to see Iron Man, Spider-Man and other character images were made into IP derivatives to achieve global sales, reaching tens of billions of dollars in revenue, based on the film's communication effect to increase IP awareness, making the production and sale of IP licensed merchandise the largest market in the IP derivatives industry. Ning (2022) states that Marvel Cinematic Universe films are merchandise produced and distributed by Disney with a global cultural and commercial impact that also amplifies its impact on society in the context of the political economy of communication (p.5). Although the domestic IP consumer market continues to grow in terms of revenue generation when compared to the Disney model, IP derivatives in China are still in their infancy, and IP homage derivatives still have a long way to develop, with the consumption behavior of fan groups still being restricted. The IP derivatives industry as an untapped market in China still suffers from many problems. There are always pirated products crowding out the IP-licensed derivatives market due to inadequate market regulation and even based on price advantages. With limited quality IP resources, major companies have caused the price of derivatives to surge for IP resources. China's IP realization model also needs innovation, although there are new commercial realization models for IP derivatives supported by the internet and media, with the development of technology and the gradual increase in fan consumption demand, the domestic IP derivatives industry is still at a preliminary stage and lags far behind the US IP industry chain business model, requiring innovation and breakthroughs in new models to develop a larger scale consumer market. China's IP realization model also needs innovation, although there are new commercial realization models for IP derivatives supported by the internet and media, with the development of technology and the gradual increase in fan consumption demand, the domestic IP derivatives industry is still at a preliminary stage and lags far behind the US IP industry chain business model, requiring innovation and breakthroughs in new models to develop a larger scale consumer market.

4. The Influence of Celebrities and Stars on Homoerotic

Homoerotic fiction is a subcultural creation product, not only expresses a more specific form of fan culture but also connects the stance, values, and consumer desires of the fan community in re-creation. The growth of the film industry and social media also showcases the diversity of the fan community. Due to the growth of digital media, fan fiction subcultures have flourished, media professionals and celebrities have exploited and commercialized the homoerotic celebrity of their fans, and the interaction between fans and the industry has been continuous and iterative (Kwon J, 2015). However, the process of homoerotic culture derivation also has an impact on the celebrities themselves. Homoerotic text creation is highlighted in certain celebrity interviews, which is more acceptable for European and American celebrities, but is a challenge for Chinese celebrities, and the homoerotic fan base still suffers negative social stereotypes. Interviews with celebrities on YouTube reveal that those educated in Western culture are more accepting of homoerotic culture, boldly stating their views on homoerotic works in interviews and even offering suggestions for fans to create. For example, Benedict Cumberbatch, the famous actor who played Doctor Strange in *The Avengers* (2012), has read out his own homoerotic works with another actor in interviews, and he was outgoing about it even when he read some intimate acts. The entire cast of *The Avengers* was present to view fan-created images of the same character, with actors Robert John Downey Jr. and Bruce Banner even reproducing the actions in the images, to the cheers of the audience.

The rise and growth of the homoerotic fan community have changed social constructs through the creation and dissemination of new ideas, the implementation of influences on politics, and the development of new cultural models to challenge the status of mainstream culture. But for the actors in *Time Raiders*, thanks to the domestic IP film marketing chain, their celebrity effect still extends the influence of homoerotic works, and

the fan community continues the life of homoerotic works through text creation and consumption. In the study of Chinese and Western homoerotic culture, the celebrity effect is used as a reference object to integrate the phenomenon of homoerotic fan culture presented by stars in different cultural and political contexts. Western societies have a high degree of identification with homoerotic culture, demonstrating the cultural capital and cultural freedom of developed countries, and although China is unable to fully embrace cultural diversity under the constraints of mainstream society, the huge fan base is still a key cultural change force. As a medium for IP works and fans, stars' public influence in the process of participating in IP film production provides a basis for fan groups to deconstruct the creation of texts, allowing homoerotic fan groups to create new cultural forms through production and consumption.

5. Conclusion

Internet media technology influences the production and consumption of culture, and the spread of homoerotic culture relies on the development of the internet to enable new forms of culture and promote changes in the relationship between people and society, spreading new ideas without breaking the conservative status of mainstream culture. Fan groups create and consume homoerotic works according to their wishes and needs, and are an important part of the business model for operating IP products. Moreover, IP is an emerging cultural industry with a large fan base. As an important form of an exhibition and combining the advantages of culture and business, the economic benefits brought by the development of IP-themed exhibitions can also contribute to economic growth. From the perspective of modern society, the current homo-fan community is more likely to use media platforms to express their pursuit of interest and freedom, and as a minority youth subculture, homo-fans are more cohesive and identifiable. China's local homo culture is part of the global subculture industry, borrowing from the development of Western homoerotic culture and creating new forms by fans to suit the local context. The celebrity effect also extends the ways in which the homo fan community interacts with IP films, providing new ideas for homoerotic creation. The production and consumption of homo-fan texts help to raise social awareness of homo-culture and IP films, promoting the commercialization of IP films and the development of the homo-fan economy. Even though there is currently a growing social acceptance of homo-fan culture and the promotion of multiple modes of fan economy commercialization, homo-fan culture still faces various and difficult situations in different cultures and geopolitics.

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